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SPECIAL ISSUE | INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE IN INDIA: THEOLOGICAL REVISIONING

A History of Syncretism of the Khoja Muslim Community

Amit Ranjan

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A History of Syncretism of the Khoja Muslim Community

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Medieval India seems to have been at the confluence of various grassroots religious/spiritual traditions. One of the important texts in this regard is Dasavatar credited to have been written Pir Sadr-ud-din, the founder of the Khoja Ismaili sect in the 15th century, in Sindh. The Dasavatar renames Kalki of Puranic literature as Nikalanak – the last messiah who is to come at the end of this era; acknowledges Vishnu, and also names Buddha as one of the avatars. Apart from the said text, this paper would also look at Nizarpanthis, a Hindu sect of Rajasthan; and Nizari Ismailis and their syncretic values. In the 19th century, a Nizari Ismaili Gujarati writer, Nanjiani, made an interesting discovery about the Hindu Nizarpanthis – that their practices incorporated various tenets from Ismaili Nizari'ism. In the Ginans – hymns of Khojas, and both the Nizari sects, one can hear echoes of a syncretic culture that was passive political resistance, grassroots and pervasive. How pervasive these movements were - can be gauged from one of the Ginans of Sadr-ud-din: "We have explained in thirty-six languages and forty-two melodies and yet, the deaf would not listen, oh my brother!"
Keywords: Religious Polemic, Khoja Ismaili sect, Hindu Nizarpanthis, Indian Islamic scholarship, Ismaili Nizari'ism.

Hindustan, the peninsula, derives its name from the river Indus or Sindhu, which has five tributaries that gush down the Himalayas and merge into one and produce the land of Punjab, or the plains fed by five rivers. This region, the Indus valley, has seen civilisations rise and fall from the time of Harappa and Mohenjedaro. It has seen Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and British regimes, as also one country fractured into two; and is such a repository of memory and history that is scarcely fathomable. Having witnessed such vicissitudes, this land evolved

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its own models of synthesis and syncretism. One of the unique models of such syncretism was the Khoja community, a Hindu community converted to Islam by a Sufi saint or an Imami Ismaili missionary or dai, Pir Sadr-e-din in the 15th century. This is a community which retained the Puranic myth of ten avatars of Vishnu and made it its sacred text, with variations.

Post mid-19th century, the Khojas and various other groups have tried to grapple with their identity within the Islamic lineages. This paper attempts to show that the history of Bhakti and Sufi movements of medieval India are understated in favour of histories of religions from a vantage point of the modern day, which are far less fluid than medieval understanding of religion in South Asia. The Sufi and Bhakti movements were nearly simultaneous; and more often than not merged into each other. Bhakti movement is understood to have origins in present day Tamil Nadu in 8th century CE, with the next boost coming in the form of Lingayat movement in modern day Karnataka in 12th century CE (Kumar 161). Sufism became popular with the likes of Khwajamoin-ud-din Chisti of Ajmer 12th century onwards. While Malik Muhammad Jayasi engaged himself with Hindu folklore, it has not been possible to ascribe a singular political theology to the great poet-saint Kabir. It is important to understand the socio-political dimension of this very grassroots movement. Reeling under heavy taxes and discrimination, the lower castes of both Hindus and Muslims need a social re-formation which came with these travelling minstrels. The advaita theology of non dualism, considering the individual soul (atma) and the universal soul (parmatma) as one, shared resonance with the Sufi theology of the maker and his human lover as being one. This movement achieved a three-fold purpose; one, it created a strong grassroots culture of syncretism; two, it showed the possibility of replacing the priest with the murshid(teacher) for guiding on the spiritual path; and three, it created a vast body of literature of love and peace in the vernaculars, appropriated from folk tales. This is a major body of literature and music that exists outside royal patronage in medieval times in India (Behl).

This paper proposes that locating the history of Khojas, Nizari Satpanthis and various other such identities within the long history of Sufism in South Asia is imperative at this point in history. There was a historic break in this understanding during the colonial regime in India that benefited from a carefully structured polarisation between Hindu and Islamic theology. While the world is grappling with neo-liberal ideas of multi-culturalism, the Sufi movement had successfully carved path half millennia ago and there are lessons in history from that period.

The historic break that occurred in the culture of the Khojas was in 1866 with the famous Aga Khan case that hinged upon the fundamental question of the

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identity of Khojas; and the court ended up defining their identity that would, from then, prove a nemesis for both unity and fluidity in this community. Prior to this as well, there were two cases adjudicated by Erskine Perry (Peerbhai 128-9), one in 1847 and one in 1851 which laid the foundations of framing the Khoja identity with a colonial lens. In the 1851 case, a Khoja woman was disallowed the right of inheritance on the ground that the Khojas were not Muslim enough to have the Shari'a govern their personal law. In the 1866 case, after the proceedings, the Khoja identity was defined by judge J. Arnold, thus:

> *It is a sect of people whose ancestors were Hindus in origin, which was converted to and has throughout abided in the faith of the Shia Imami Ismailis, and which has always been and still is bound by ties of spiritual allegiance to the hereditary Imams of the Ismailis*. (emphasis in the text)
>
> In order to enjoy the full privileges of membership in the Khoja community, all the terms of the above description must be complied with… (Anon 360)

The community was not just defined, but the ramifications of hitherto not following this definition were also laid down. This paper shall discuss further Teena Purohit's contention that it was not just a colonial lens, but an Arab-centric one also. The personal laws of Shari'a fitted in well with British jurisprudence; this is a classic case of using the idea of "one size fits all" or using the canon to jeopardize what lies outside it. Carissa Hickling contends:

> British officials perceived in Islam a system of law which mirrored their own. Therefore, the shari'a was, for all intents and purposes, Muslim law to be directly equated with a set of legal prescriptions which could be used by British judges to rule on a complete range of personal issues…Eighth and ninth century scholars of the shari'a became the appropriate 'legal authorities' to consult. The opinions (fatwas) of these 'legal authorities' were treated as legal precedents, with their treatises being 'legal precedents' (Hickling 63).

The binary-obsession of the British colonial regime wanted everything neatly categorized, and these groups with great fluidity came under utter duress to be defined by a legal system that believed in essences, and not contexts. Zulfikar Hirji opines that some authorities started recognising that some communities should be allowed to operate as castes instead of religion. Hirji's contention has a point; however, being identified as a caste group outside religion would also make these groups unable to access both the religions that till this time they had been accessing with ease. Hirji says:

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When these laws began to be applied more widely throughout British India during the first half of 19th century, some British officials began to recognize that there were many local groups whose practices and personal laws did not fall neatly into the prescriptive legal categories of 'Mohammadan' (Muslim) and 'Gentoo' (Hindu). Hence, in areas such as Bombay Presidency, the legal system made for allowances for liminal groups to continue operating as caste-based entities, whose established traditions and customs prevailed, irrespective of the religious tradition (Hindu/Muslim) to which such customs could ideally be described. (Hirji, "The Socio-Legal Formation of the Nizari Ismailis Of East Africa, 1800-1950")

In the light of the above arguments, let us have a look at the Aga Khan case of 1866, also known as "The Advocate General ex-relations Daya Muhammad and others vs Muhammad Husen Husseini and others."

The Aga Khan Case

In her book, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India*, Teena Purohit points out to the historic break in the matter of identity of the Khojas, in 1866. A large group of the Bombay Khojas refused to pay tithes to Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Shia Imami Ismaili community, citing that they were Sunnis whereas Aga Khan was a Shia and therefore not just not their leader, but also not a Khoja. The court eventually ruled that the Khojas were converts to Islmali Islam and were bound to Aga Khan as their spiritual leader. Purohit calls this the beginning of 'identitarianism' amongst the Khojas, who till this time followed traditions that were a syncretic mix of Hindu and Islamic heritage. She emphasizes that to understand Islam as a global religion, one has to understand the various contexts in which the religion flourished, and that an understanding of these local contexts is essential as opposed to trying to approach the issue through a general understanding of Islam as it is in the Middle East.

In an interview, Purohit opines that it was an Orientalist and Arab-centric lens that led to the formulation of this identitarianism:

> What I mean by an "Arab-centered" approach is that it gives primacy to origins of Islam–the classical Arab period and Arabic texts. This approach was consolidated in the 19th century when Orientalists wrote definitive accounts of Islam on the basis of their philological work in Arabic. This perspective predominates today in the popular media as well as the western academy: Islam is thought to be understood primarily through Arabic religious texts (Quran and Hadith) and Arab-centric practices, such as pilgrimage to Mecca and praying in the direction

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of the Kaaba.

Purohit argues that in her book, she has tried to look at gināns "from a literary perspective as a way to think religion outside the language of identity." She goes on to critique the community scholars as well, of not having taken a long syncretic history into mind, but of having followed the same ideological approach as mentioned above:

> The gināns are body of South Asian Muslim devotional poetry composed in the Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu languages between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These texts have been primarily translated and interpreted by scholars of Ismaili studies, who have adopted an Arab-centric perspective to understand these texts. That is, they have analyzed the gināns as part of a continuous Ismaili tradition that can be traced to the origins of Islam.(Ahmad, "XQs I: A Conversation with Teena Purohit,")

A literary analysis is useful to extricate the matter from an identitarian/sectarian approach, and locate the Khoja heritage amidst a larger grassroots Sufi/Bhakti heritage which involved exchanges not just a spiritual nature, but also of a literary one. Purohit argues for her methodology thus:

> I situate the gināns as "Islamicate" texts because I am interested in the how these texts are embedded in local contexts and how their texture and movement help us understand religious practices that are not derivations of an Arab Islam, but instantiations of local Islam, described by the poems as Satpanth. My analyses of the poems foreground how the Satpanth tradition reworks classical Sanskrit and Arabic forms and ideas, giving them new meaning and significance. These "borrowings" and "exchanges" set in motion particular ways of imagining community and belonging that are not based on a restrictive conception of identity. (Ibid)

The *All India Reporter* of 1866 (Henceforth AIR) has vivid details of the case. The case report reinforces the idea of British colonial obsession with apparently empirical and copious writing – not just through the text of the report, but also with the proceedings of the case. The case lasted twenty four days, and the above-mentioned report runs into forty pages. In deciding whether Khojas are Shias or Sunnis, the court decided to go into fundamental questions like "What are the Sunis as distinct from Shias," "Who and what are Shia Imami Ismailis," "Who and what is the first defendant Aga Khan," "Who and what are the Khojas, and what has been their relations with the first defendant and their ancestors," "What

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have been the relations of the first defendant Aga Khan, with the particular community to which the relators and the plaintiff belong, viz, the Khoja community of Bombay?" (Anon 359)

The apparently neutral empirical tone of the questions has a clear Orientalist and an Arab-centric ideological positioning, attempting to locate the ontology of Khojas within an Sunni-Fatimide divide and discrediting its syncretic, organic origins. The case report could act as ready reckoner for the history of Islam up till 19th century, but it fails to understand, or contrariwise, does understand that it would sow seeds of identitarianism and usher in a modern understanding of linear histories of theologies. The copious references to Western Orientalist texts make the framework of the case apparent:

> In the course of the argument the following works were extensively refered to by counsel on both sides :-- Hamilton's Hedaya, the Koran,Morle's Administration of Justice in India, Muir's Life of Mahomed, Sale's Preliminary Discourse on the Koran, De Sacy's Expose de la Religion des Druzes, De Herbelot's Bibliotheque Orientale, Von Hammer's History of Assassins, Gibbon's Decline and Fall of Roman Empire,Milman's Notes,Katab al Waekidi,Buckhardt's Arabic Proverbs, Dabistan, Voyages de Chardin, Burton's Pilgrimage to Mecca, Sir J. Malcolm's Translations from the Persian in Vol 1 of the Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay, Desatir, Watson's History of Persia, Moshun's Account of the Initiation of Islmailis, the Lokrea, the Ginans, NasiKhutTawarikh, Ockley's History of the Saracens, Kitab al Sigaset, Kinneir's Topographical History of Persia, History of Sir C. Napier's Administration of Sind, Elphinston's History of India under the Mahomedans, Akbar Shah's Divine Monotheism, Autobiography of the Emperor Baber. (Ibid 326)

Taqiah / Takiyya

Taqiah

Judge J. Arnold, in the 1866 Aga Khan case, does mention the issue of Taqiah as an important factor to consider. The contention of the Bombay Khojas was that they were Sunnis, having had been converted by Pir Sadr-e-Din in the 15th century, who himself was Sunni. On the other hand, the Khojas on the side of Aga Khan contended that Pir Sadr-e-Din was an emissary of Ismaili Imamis and so they were bound to pay tithes to Aga Khan, the current leader of the sect. The court went through Shi'ite history and acknowledged that secret practices or Taqiah were essential to the survival of various Shia sects, as they had faced substantial persecution in Sunni majority territories. Therefore, Khojas not having overt ritual practices, or them following Sunni rituals for rites of passage was not a proof of them being Sunni. The court cited the use of 'Dashavatar' as a text which ruled

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out the possibility of them being Sunnis.

The court operated in its colonial wisdom of binary divides, and often quoted comparisons with Christianity in England to draw home its point. It is with a very 19th century teleological view of history that the court decided upon the case. The court understood the idea of 'Taqiah,' however it could not appreciate its context that these hidden rituals were based on negotiations – that while Islam was taken up by Khojas, old cultural traditions bound the people to their land and memory. The ramifications of the judgement are apparent. In the face of persecution by mainstream Islam, many Khojas would attempt to mainstream and distance themselves from esoteric texts and practices of centuries; it would lead to binary identity formations – one could either be this or that. This also subsumed an autonomous, unique Khoja identity within a larger discourse of Islamic sectarianism.

Taqiyya is well explained

As an interesting aside, it serendipitously occurred to me that the Urdu term 'taqiahqalaam' could be related to this practice of Shi'ite taqiah. 'Qalaam' is a speech-act and the phrase 'taqiahqalaam' means 'catchphrase' that an individual uses in his day-to-day speech inadvertently, as a filler in between sentences, without adding meaning to it. The speech of a person indulging in taqiah would be interspersed with various things he does not believe in, to be agreeable with a Sunni Muslim. This would then have become a parodic joke at Shias in South Asia, with 'taqiahkalaam' meaning the lip service rendered by them, without them meaning it. As is wont, the phrase entered a secular lexicon meaning 'meaningless phrases' uttered by people. The pervasiveness of this phrase in both modern day Hindi and Urdu is testimony also the pervasiveness of taqiah practices. It also a tribute to the term 'taqiah' itself, for the etymology of this phrase itself is hidden. There is no significant analysis or exploration of this relationship in scholarship on the subject.

The court cited persecution by Sunnis with an example from Akbar's time. Abdul Kadir, in Akbar's court, who was entrusted with translating the *Ramayana* from Sanskrit into Persian, notes in his diary *Muntakab-al-Tawarikh*(the English translation quoted was by Mr Edward Rehatsek) the assassination of Moola Ahmad, a Shia 'Moola' who celebrated the religious reforms of the emperor. Moola Ahmad had apparently "publicly cursed the companions of the Prophet (the first three caliphs)" The murderer was hanged four days later, but the inhabitants of Lahore, "*disinterred one night his stinking carcass* (Moola Ahmad's) *and burnt it*" (emphasis in the text). The court cognized that if this could happen in Akbar's time, a man known for religious tolerance and syncretism – in the currently day, taqiah was but a naturally protective practice. (Ibid 355-57)

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It is interesting to note that the Persian Ramayana mentioned above was the first illustrated form of the epic. It is notable that Akbar also issued gold coins bearing the figures of Rama and Sita; they are now held by various museums including State Museum, Lucknow. (Uddin, "Emperor Akbar's Persian Ramayana and Khan-e-Khanan's copy,")

While the court judgement has a celebratory tone towards Akbar's reforms, it almost chastises the Khoja community for holding similar ground. It rambles into Aga Khan's lineage, which makes an interesting read, but seems pretty unnecessary. It goes into the history of the dynasty of "Order of Assassins of Alamut" of Persia, in which it also deliberately brings up the history of Zakresalam of 11th century, and his announcement that eating pork and drinking wine was legal. In invoking such a history from eight centuries earlier, the court clearly took an Arab-centric view of what Islam is and who is entitled to its fold. The court also scolded the Khojas for not being charitable, for not making pilgrimages to Pir Sadr-e-din's "durga" in Ootch, and even said that it would dissolve the community, had it been in its powers. The use of Dasavatar is also seen as proof of disenfranchisement. (Anon 355-363) The court's condescending attitude is testimony of British colonial discomfort with lack of neat ordering according to their Orientalist and simplistic understanding.

Dasavatar

The mention of Dasavatar comes up several times in the Aga Khan Case. A few things that are established through the case document is that the the tradition of Dasavatar was still prominent in the nineteenth century:

> The evidence taken in this case proves incontestably that in all the JamatKhanas of Khojas throughout India and the East, including that of Bombay, the Dashavatar is publicly and periodically read as a matter of stated religious observance. (Ibid 354)

corrupt religious beliefs. Blasphemy

As already stated, the court takes a patronising, and condescending attitude towards not just Khoja rituals, but also their origins. At several points in the case report, it is mentioned that the dais or missionaries were wily and clever in their strategies to agree with native populations on their religious beliefs and thereafter, they would introduce their own religious tenets to the existing dogmas of a certain community. While one could agree that such a strategy could or would have been adopted, what is completely silent in this position is that the community was already four centuries old at this point, and that that length of time is long enough

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"pretend" as a preacher or the old religion of the people intended to be converted

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to build its own history and cultural memories that cannot be straitjacketed into the history of mainstream organised religions. The court observed:

> It is precisely such a book (Dasavatar) as a Dai or missionary of the Ismailis would compose or adapt if he wished to convert a body of not very learned Hindus to the Imami Islamili faith. It precisely carries out, what it has already been shown, were the standing instructions to the Dais of the Ismailis viz., to procure conversions *by assuming, as in great part true, the religious stand-point of the intended convertite*. This is exactly what the book does: it assumes the nine incarnations of Vishnu to be true as far as they go, but not the whole truth, and then supplements the imperfect Vishnuvite system by superadding the cardinal doctrine of the Ismailis, the incarnation and coming manifestation (or Avatar) of the 'Most Holy Ali' When the book is read in the Jamat Khana of the Khojas, it is this 10th chapter (as appears from the evidence) which is alone now-a-days seriously attended to. (Ibid 354)

The how hindu Dasavatar book is changed / corrupted with malafide intention

An interesting point that emerges from the above statement is that it is only the tenth book that was "seriously attended to" by mid-19th century. The 1866 case would place that also in jeopardy for the future. This statement shows that there was already a synchronisation going on, under the colonial influence, to negate four centuries of customary practice. An intangible cultural heritage was taking a tangible religious shape.

Gulshan Khakee, in his unpublished PhD dissertation (1972) also agrees with this idea that by the end of the 19th century, it was only the tenth book that remained important. He compares various Dasavatar manuscripts, mostly 19th century documents, and goes on to the translate the tenth book, which is eschatological and messianic, as it is in the Puranic tradition as well, with the exception of Ali being the tenth avatar instead of Kalki. In his synopsis of the first nine books, an interesting pattern of syncretic writing in the Dasavatar emerges. Each of the first nine avatars of Vishnu follow the Puranic tradition, and the yugas last 4,32,000 years and several souls are released with the end of the yuga. Several souls, however, following Islamic theological model, are sent to 'dozakh' or eternal hell. The vocabulary is mostly a mix of elements borrowed from both Puranic and Islamic traditions. It is very interesting that the myth of ten avatars – which is generally vague common knowledge amongst Hindus, the Puranic texts having had become archaic and secondary to Ramayana and Mahabharata – was passed on as a tradition in the Khoja culture.

Nizarpanthis

Dominique-Sila Khan, who passed away in late 2016, was an astute scholar of re-

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ligions in South Asia. A lot of her work is about shared cultures of various Hindu and Muslim sects in in the subcontinent. In one of her illuminating essays, "The coming of Nikalank Avatar," she looks at the messianic themes in some sectarian traditions of north-western India (Khan, "The Coming of Nikalank Avatar" 401-426). Her article is driven by a late 19th century book by Sachedina Nanjiani, entitled *Khoja Vrittant*, in which he noticed that the Nizarpanthi Hindus had a lot common with Nizari Ismailis. Khan picks up this thread of homonymic serendipity in her article, and goes on to delineate that the messianic and the eschatological themes between the Nizarpanthis and the Nizari Islamilis are very similar – both talk about the coming of the Nikalank avatar and him waging a battle against Kalinga (the demon of Kalyug); there are similarities in the rest of the narrative of the ten avatars like in the Khoja Dasavatar and so on. Nikalank will come from the west, and kill Kalinga and marry Vishwa Kumari (Khan 412) or the Virgin Earth. This is a clear indication of the Islamic influence; Mahdi or Qaim is refashioned as Nikalank and marriage with Vishwa Kumari signifies the conversion or the conquest of the people of this land. Nanjiani also mentions the vocabulary used by various other such Hindu groups like Jasnathis, Bishnois and others in which Pir Sadr-e-din is referred to as Sahadev or Harchand. The narrative of Agam-Vanis (the tale of the future to come) also includes that the Sayyids of India will attack and the five Pandavas will join them to punish "Qazis and Mollas." (Ibid 414) These are interesting syncretic threads which we are witnessing, with Pandavas joining Sayyids to defeat the corrupt clerics.

However, this is where the reading of Khan takes an ideological shape. She reads the "Qazis and Mollas" as Sunnis rather than a corrupt religio-political order. She also attributes Sufism in India to Sunnis, and builds up her argument from there. Nanjiani was an ex-Khoja (Ibid 404), and in 1892, after the court cases mentioned above, his position would be a nostalgic one after the growing identitarianism within the Khojas. So, he contends that the Nizari Ismailis had several esoteric practices and they would not reveal them to the "nugras," a term which means "one who does not have a Guru." In effect then, anyone who was not a Nizari Ismaili would not know of the secret practices and therefore the Nizarpanthi Hindus must have been converted from Hinduism to Islam, and then reconverted back to Hinduism. Their conversion was not complete and there was a possibility of them going back to their original fold. This is the explanation offered by Nanjiani as well as Khan. Khan goes on to say that within Sikh theology as well, there is a mention of Nishkalank avatar, as well as mention of taxes like "pawal" and "dashondh," as in Nizari texts. Retracing the symbols and tropes, she opines that they also must have been Nizari Ismailis at some point of time. She also contends

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that these messianic texts or Agam-Vanis did not lead to any political revolution, because these texts made the followers that they were well within the epoch and that "qayamat" was still a distance away.

This assumption of all these sects branching out from Nizaris, in my opinion, is the same fallacy as was introduced by the British court in the 1866 Aga Khan case. As Frantz Fanon succinctly puts it, "Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation… It is the colonist who *fabricated and continues to fabricate* the colonized subject." (Fanon 2) The "reification" secreted and nurtured by the colonial establishment, of straitjacketed categories of Hindu and Muslim, Shia and Sunni, formed a kind of framework of how to look retrospectively at the history of these sects. Khan cites Shackle and Moir and also agrees that "the stronger Muslim 'flavour' of the ginanic literature was not the consequence of a successfully completed conversion program but was due to gradual reIslamization of the Khoja heritage which had begun after 1866 Aga Khan case of Bombay. (Shackle and Moir, "*Ismaili Hymns from South Asia- An Introduction to the Ginans*" 420)

Let us have a look at the arguments of Khan and Nanjiani, separated by a century, but following a similar thread of colonial argument. The first point is about the "nugras" or those who did not have a "guru" and that "nugras" would not be able to know the esoteric terminology of Nizaris. One of Sufism's prime tenets was the presence of a "guru" as has been discussed in the introduction. In fact one of Kabir's couplets is definitional of Sufi teachings. He says, "Guru Govind doukhade, kaake lagoon paayen/Balihari guru aapne Govind diyobataye," (Guru and the God both are standing, whose feet do I touch/ I bow down before the Guru, for he has led me to God). The importance of guru was not an exclusive Ismaili tenet, and one can argue that in the process of these conversions, all these wandering teachers held fluid identities; they were anyway deviants from the orthodox religious categories. The Nikalanak avatar seems to be a common thread running amongst all these sects like Jasnathis, Nizarpanthis, even Sikhs; and though they may have the imprint of Shia influence through Nikalank coming from the west; the narratives seem to be part of a larger Sufi narrative that may have been culled from various sources; and given the fact that the Sufi saints themselves came from the "west" it does not establish a straight Ismaili connection. That the Agam-Vanis did not lead to a political revolution may not be because of lack of a message in the messianic text; but because Sufism and allied movements were more concerned with reforming the social order than taking on the might of the political powers.

What needs to be taken into account is the class struggle that was waged through

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these movements; Khan acknowledges that many of these sects were of lower castes and classes and were struggling for a new vision, a new umbrella that would earn them self-respect. The socio-political order of medieval India was negotiated through religion, and people found new appeal in Sufi-Bhakti preachings. While Khan looks at the common enemy of Sayyeds and Pandavas in "Qazis and Mollas" as Sunnis, another reading of it is that the new order being brought in by Bhakti-Sufi movement would upstage the clerical order. Khan also is dismissive of Sufism insinuating that it was a Sunni movement, whereas there were numerous saints of both the creeds in it. In fact, esotericism, which is the mainstay of Sufism, was a Shia preserve amongst the two. Therefore, my contention is that while factually Khan's research is illuminating, it may be misleading in terms of understanding the histories of these sects. While there may have been definite Nizari influences in shaping these identities, one needs to understand the larger social rubric in which Sufism was operating, and creating these new fluid identities against the grain of organised religion. It is difficult today to claim a Sufi heritage because of its loosely held precepts and it not having a teleological historic order. In the last century, Sufism has also got ossified in many ways; and it is important to understand the fluidity that gave respite to many people in the medieval times.

The serendipity of Najiani is still encountered anywhere in the subcontinent even today, in long drawn cultural practices. There are numerous testimonies from, and vestiges in modern-day South Asia that point out to this variegated and assimilative history. Songs composed by Amir Khusro are still sung in the Qawwali and other forms in the sub-continent with the theme of Radha and Krishna. To cite just one example, Gambhira is a tradition of Bengal in which one person from the village plays the role of Shiva, and the villagers tell him the events of the entire past year and supplicate to him for justice. The supplication is done through popular songs, and the popular songs have kept changing with popular music of the day. After the partition of India, Bengal also got partitioned and in East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, it is Muslims who preserve the tradition. The history of grassroots movements can be very deviant from histories of organised religion.

Notes:

1. The case is discussed in detail, later in the paper, and proved to be a watershed one in terms of Khoja identity.

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